

Dear Friends in Christ,

This year I noticed that a number of churches in the Phoenix area didn't use the word Easter in their advertising. Instead, they listed their services as Resurrection worship.

That's a positive change. Too often our society sees Easter as nothing more than candy, lilies and decorated eggs. Easter has become a spring festival rather than what it truly is: the festival of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

To use the word "Resurrection" to announce an Easter service is a declaration of truth. Jesus rising from the dead is the most important fact in human history. After all, without the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, you and I have no hope.

So during these post-Easter Sundays, we will see ourselves as Resurrection Christians. And today we can say that

RESURRECTION CHRISTIANS HAVE THEIR MARCHING ORDERS

I. The risen Savior is sending us out. As we go, we go rejoicing in his victory and ours.

Consider the disciples for a moment. We are told on that Easter evening that, **"The disciples were together with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders."** They had seen the Jewish leaders kill their Lord, and they figured they might be next. But they should have known better. Jesus had told them clearly that he was going to rise from the dead. So when he appears, the mood of the disciples changes quickly. **"The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."**

This is how we feel on Resurrection Sunday. Yes, we already know the outcome, but there is always some sadness in our hearts after standing under the cross on Good Friday. But when we say, "Christ is risen, he is risen indeed," joy replaces sadness. We have joy in the victory of our Savior, a joy we take with us every day.

Jesus now says, **"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you."** Jesus has a plan. His disciples were going to become his apostles. They wouldn't just follow Jesus; he was sending them out to represent him in the world. He had taught them well. Now they were going to carry out the plan to take the message of the resurrection to the world.

To help them, Jesus **"breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"** The Spirit would guide the apostles, giving them courage in the face of opposition. There was no more running away or hiding for these believers. The Spirit would give them the strength and the words to say in spreading the good news.

Nothing has changed. By God's grace you and I have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. He called us to faith through the Word and the Sacrament of Baptism, and now he leads us. His presence assures us that God is for us. His presence gives us the power to carry out the Lord's ministry here on earth. As he sustained the apostles through Word and Sacrament, so he does the same for us.

Never forget the marching orders of our Lord Jesus. He sends us out to represent him. And he gives us the presence of the Holy Spirit to give us the guidance, the confidence, and even the words to say as we march for him. What a wonderful gift our risen Savior has given us.

Jesus now points to one specific area of our ministry as Resurrection Christians.

II. Our risen Savior sends us out with the keys to the kingdom of heaven.

Listen to Jesus: **"If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."** Jesus forgave the sins of all people through his suffering and death and resurrection. That forgiveness remains the key teaching of the

Christian church. The problem is that so many people don't know that God has forgiven sins through Jesus Christ. Or people don't see the need for such forgiveness. Jesus is here giving his disciples the power and authority to forgive the sorrowing sinner, but to withhold forgiveness to the one who refuses to repent and change his sinful ways. The church calls this the ministry of the keys, the ministry to either lock or unlock the doors of heaven to a sinner. You and I have this ministry also. You see, these keys are simply Law and Gospel.

By the Gospel we proclaim to a person that their sins are forgiven. We make that proclamation when a person is repentant. That means they are sorry for the sins they have committed and are looking for relief from the guilt they feel.

You and I have the privilege to point a repentant person to the cross of Christ and to his empty tomb. We have the privilege of telling the sinner that their sins were forgiven through all that Jesus has done for them. This is the sweetest good news for a guilty sinner. It is good news that lifts a person's spirits and lets them see that the door of heaven is wide open for them.

If you have had stubborn children, you know that it isn't always easy to get them to repent of a sin, to sorrow over it and to change their behavior. When you show them how wrong they are, you are using the Law. And when they admit their guilt, you comfort them with the Gospel, the good news of Jesus who forgives and saves them. You encourage them with the words of Paul, **"Clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think how to gratify the desires of the sinful flesh."**

Now, if we do that with our children, we can also use the keys to the kingdom of heaven with a brother or sister in the faith who has gone astray. Our goal is always to bring them back to Christ.

A young lady came into the office. Her mother had sent her. When asked why, the young lady admitted she had not been coming to church and made a series of lame excuses why not. The pastor listened and then asked her, "What is it you have done?"

After a few moments, the young lady opened up. She admitted to a sin, she admitted her guilt had kept her from coming to church. Tears of remorse fell down her cheeks. Did the pastor threaten her with hellfire because of her sins? Absolutely not. He assured her of God's full and free forgiveness through Jesus. The Gospel key was used to re-open the door of heaven for this person.

Sadly, it doesn't always work that way. Some people, even some who call themselves Christians, become hardened in their hearts. When their sin is pointed out to them, they refuse to repent or be sorry for what they did.

So what do we do? In love we warn them that they are on the road to eternal destruction. We remind them of the words of God through Ezekiel, **"The soul that sins is the one that will die."** With great sadness we have to tell them that the door to heaven is closed to them. We can't assure such a person of God's forgiveness. Our prayer is that they will acknowledge their sin so that we can joyfully hold out to them that their sin is forgiven.

These are our marching orders as Resurrection Christians. Share the joy of what our Savior has done for every one of us by his suffering, death and resurrection. And then, when appropriate, use Law and Gospel, the keys of the kingdom, to bring the message of forgiveness to the heart of a fellow sinner. Through the Holy Spirit, God will help us as we carry out his work in this world. Amen.

The peace of God that passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen